

Book Review: Researching the City: A Guide for Students by Kevin Ward

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Kevin Ward's Researching the City is a practical guide for students focusing on the city and on the different ways to research it. The authors explains how research is done, from the original idea to design and implementation, through to writing up and representation. Zachary Spicer writes that this book is constructive, engaging and would be of value to students at the outset of a major research project or dissertation on some aspect of city life.



Researching the City: A Guide for Students. Kevin Ward. Sage Publishing. November 2013

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Over the past decade, urban research and the study of cities have increasingly become inter-disciplinary in focus, now claimed as the domain of geographers, political scientists, economists, historians, anthropologists and sociologists. Departments of urban studies have popped up at dozens, if not hundreds, of universities worldwide. Urban studies journals attract hundreds of quality submissions every year and thousands of readers, while urban studies associations are amongst the fastest growing academic groups. Needless to say, the city is now not only a unit of analysis, but the focus of an emerging discipline. With the growing interest in urban studies, it is time that students hoping to study the city receive a proper methodological primer. [Kevin Ward's](#) edited volume, *Researching the City*, seeks to do just that.

Researching the City is an interesting and useful tool for students hoping to conduct quality research on urban phenomena. Ward's volume is intended to help students at the dissertation stage and essentially lays out the purpose, direction and expected outcomes, along with the advantages and disadvantages, methodological approaches. He focuses on eight different approaches: archival research, interviews, ethnography, questionnaires, linguistic and discourse analysis, diary research, GIS and photography and video work. In each chapter, the authors carefully outline how each approach has been used, how they are designed and what one might expect in terms of results. In several chapters the authors draw from past work and personal experience and very candidly demonstrate methodological intricacies that may not be detailed elsewhere.

The contributing authors are mostly geographers, but those in other disciplines would find value in their advice and approach. In fact, examining some of the methodologies traditionally used exclusively within geography, such as GIS, may be of immense value to those outside the discipline.

Like most edited volumes, *Researching the City* has its strengths, but also its weaknesses. First, there is little information on comparative analysis. It is almost taken for granted that students will be embarking upon single city case studies. When comparing cities, different institutional, structural and legal frameworks need to be taken into account, along with economic and social conditions. This is even more important when students are engaging in work comparing cities in different countries. It is a rarity when two cities lend themselves well to a perfect comparison. Students need to be aware of these constraints, especially considering the growing interest in studies comparing cities across borders, and given a proper understanding of how to overcome these research challenges.



A chapter devoted entirely to comparative research would be appreciated.



London's Tower Bridge at night. Credit [Justin](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

Second, it would be great to provide students with a better understanding of the scope and scale of city research. The city itself is a popular focus, but often researchers must drill down to the neighbourhood level or take a broader view of the city by examining the city-region. The social, cultural, economic, and environmental forces produced at both levels have an impact on “the city” – making students aware of these broader phenomena and the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research at these levels would be helpful. Not every researcher examines the city as the urban space within its (often centrally) delimited borders. Therefore, a discussion on the scale and scope of the city and how these levels are interconnected could prove quite valuable for students. Again, much of this work has a comparative focus.

Finally, a greater explanation as to what “the city” is, how it is theoretically conceived and the relationship between urban and rural would be valuable for students. Urban research has a theoretical base and a strong overview of this would help students examining city life. Some of the chapters in the book do make mention of theoretical conceptualizations of cities, but little of this goes into much depth. Ward also addresses this in the first chapter, but the introduction to the city, its definition and the history of work in the field is brief. Devoting more space to the problems associated with defining what the “city”, what “urban” encompasses and a survey of the discipline would likely be of value to students as well.

With these points acknowledged it is important to reiterate the aims of *Researching the City*. Ward’s volume is a sincere effort to help students organize their research and make a valuable contribution to our broader research agenda on the city. Ward is modest about the goals of the book stating in the concluding chapter: “This book will not solve the problems you are likely to face when you decide to research the city, for cities are complicated combinations and outcomes of a range of cultural, economic, environmental, social, political, and technological processes...they are complicated in this way – and others too – is also what makes them the subject of so many dissertations each year at universities around the world” (p. 160). Ward is correct: urban research is complex and constantly evolving. Finding a place for your research is challenging for students, but Ward’s volume goes to great lengths to be helpful in this regard.

Overall, *Researching the City* is constructive and engaging and would be of value to students at the outset of a major research project or dissertation on some aspect of city life. From finding a project, defining a focus and selecting methodology, Ward's volume sets out to shepherd students through the early challenges of research. In this task, *Researching the City* succeeds. It will help students organize their thoughts, focus the scope of their research and sharpen their methodological approach. For these reasons, I am happy to recommend *Researching the City*.

Zachary Spicer is a PhD Candidate at The University of Western Ontario, where he studies local government and Canadian politics. His research has appeared in *Canadian Public Administration*, the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, the *Journal of Legislative Studies* and the *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*. You can follow him on twitter at [@ZacSpicer](#). [Read more reviews by Zachary](#).

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